

President's Remarks

First United Church of Christ 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration

Nov. 5, 2007

Rev. Bast, members of the congregation, and all of the friends of the First United Church of Christ, congratulations on this your 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration.

I consider it a great privilege, indeed an honor, to be asked to be here with you on such an important day in your history. As the President of Heidelberg, a college with a 15-year history with the German Reformed, Evangelical and United Church of Christ, I take these types of celebrations very seriously because they are important markers that help to define who we are and where we want to go.

As you reflect on your history, you honor the events, the people and the decisions that shaped who you are today. But more importantly, you will be defining where you intend to go in the years ahead. The opportunity to celebrate a 150 year anniversary is a great accomplishment. It means you have done a number of things right and have made some very wise decisions over the years.

A sesquicentennial anniversary is an all the more impressive accomplishment when you think about how rapidly the world has been changing over the past few decades. As the fall semester rolls around every year and new students come to campus I am reminded in remarkable ways how quickly times are changing and why 150-year celebrations are rare events. For example, for the freshman that arrived at Heidelberg this year digital cameras have always existed. Reality shows have always been on T.V. Water has always been in a bottle. Professional athletes have always competed in the Olympics. Al Gore has always been running for president or thinking about doing so, and a Bush or a Clinton has always been in the White House (Boloit College Mindset List).

With change occurring at an accelerating rate, you not only should be very proud of your 150 years of service to God and community, you should also ask, why are we still here when half a dozen other churches close every week? Or maybe more importantly, how can we assure that we will be here for yet another 150 years?

There is a relatively simple answer to that question: faith linked to vision. A dominant theme, if not the dominant theme, of both the Old and New Testaments is faith. Hebrews Chapter 11 is the climatic statement on faith in the Bible. Chapter 11, Verse 1 of Hebrews reads:

*“Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.”*

Throughout Chapter 11 great examples of faith are described. The text says:

By faith Enoch was taken from this life so he would not experience death.

By faith Abraham offered Isaac as a sacrifice.

By faith Moses led God's people out of Egypt.

By faith the walls of Jericho fell.

Hebrews goes on to describe the heroes of faith by saying:

*“I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, David, Samuel, the prophets who through faith: conquered kingdoms, administered justice, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of flames, escaped the edge of the sword, and routed foreign armies. Others were tortured, some faced jeers and flogging. Others were chained and put in prisons. They were stoned, sawed in two and put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.”*

These heroes of the Bible truly faced trials and tribulations that tested their faith. But in the end, what happened to them? They were all commended by God for their faith.

Let me ask a similar question of you. As a congregation, what is to happen to you? Where will the collective faith and vision of this church take you? Today you celebrate 150 years as a church. There have been high points and low points during those 15 decades. You have been tested by such things as the untimely death of a pastor as well as the death of a pastor’s wife. You experienced the oppressive yoke of a “deep debt” after building a new church. You suffered through multiple floods and the loss of church property and records. You even had to put up with seminary students from Heidelberg serving as your supply pastor for several years!

But you also grew stronger when you first became an independent German Reformed Congregation in 1957. You grew stronger when you built or moved to new churches in 1858, 1906 and 1974. And you grew stronger yet when you became a part of the United Church of Christ in 1957.

Is your past helping to define your future as you begin to think about what your collective vision might be for the decades ahead? Or to paraphrase Verse 1 of Chapter 11 of Hebrews, do you have the faith to be sure of what you hope for over the next 150 years? Are you certain about what you can not yet see?

It is my great hope that you have the faith and vision to move, as the old hymn says, “to higher ground” as you begin another 150-year journey. This is what the hymn says:

*“I’m pressing on the upward way  
New heights I’m gaining every day;  
Still praying as I onward bound,  
Lord, plant my feet on higher ground.”*

Let me ask, does your collective faith have you gaining every day?  
Do you really want to be planted on higher ground?

Listen to more words from that hymn:

*“My heart has not desire to stay  
Where doubts arise and fears dismay;  
Though some may dwell where those abound  
My prayer, my aim is higher ground.”*

These lines prompt more questions. Are you willing to leave your doubts and fears behind? Does your vision allow you to see the higher ground?

And here are some final words from the hymn:

*“I want to scale the utmost height  
And catch a gleam of glory bright;  
But still I’ll pray till Heaven I’ve found  
Lord, plant my feet on higher ground.”*

Can you combine your faith with vision to scale the utmost heights? After 150 years, are you complacent or are you ready to move to even higher ground?

Second Corinthians talks about how where the spirit of the Lord is, believers are transformed and move from glory to glory. As people of faith and vision who can come together in joyous celebration of 150 years of serving Jesus Christ, you now have the opportunity to climb to even higher ground and to move from glory to glory.

You have much to celebrate today. In faith and with vision you have even more to anticipate in the decades ahead.

Godspeed and God bless on your next 150 years.

Thank you.